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A NOTE ON THE ENGLISH CHARACTER.

Among the great events that happened during my stay as a student in Germany was the death of Mr. Gladstone, and consequently I had the opportunity of viewing the career and character of our great statesman through foreign spectacles. Throughout the European press generally there was a remarkable unanimity of appreciation. In other countries, as in England, the years of Mr. Gladstone's retirement had rendered possible a broad, dispassionate view of his life-work, and while, of course, criticism was not altogether silent, the general verdict was one of hearty approval. Even where it was held that Mr. Gladstone's policy had been a mistaken one, no doubt was entertained that it proceeded from an earnest, sincere, and lofty purpose. In the midst of this consensus of opinion Germany seemed to stand irresolute. No people is so readily responsive to outside influence as the German; and much newspaper criticism adopted the general attitude above described. But one felt, somehow, that this was not an expression of spontaneous sentiment, and that neither the virtues nor the achievements of Mr. Gladstone appealed very strongly to the German mind. To the Junker and the Bismarckian, his liberalism appeared revolutionary; to the Liberal, his piety seemed a childish superstition; and the proletariat of intellect regarded his Homeric criticism as beneath contempt. Mutterings of this discontent were observable enough amidst the conventional platitudes of the daily press. But, by and by, it found a less uncertain voice in *Zukunft*, a weekly journal notorious for its sharp criticism of the government, the editor of which was, when I left Germany, undergoing prosecution for *lèse-majesté*.

The *Zukunft's* article was crude and inadequate; but in spite of the pain which almost any Englishman must have felt in reading it, I was deeply interested in it as an honest and outspoken expression of German sentiment. The judgment pronounced by this organ of advanced German opinion on the character of our great statesman was not merely that he was

a demagogue, but that he was a quack and a hypocrite. And the interest attaching to the judgment lay in the confirmation it gave to an opinion I held, that Mr. Gladstone was in many fundamental respects a typical Englishman. For it so happens, and here I come to the main purpose of my paper, that the central feature of the English character, as seen by the intelligent foreigner, is hypocrisy. And all I propose to do, on the present occasion, is to offer a few discursive reflections on this interesting fact. What then should be our attitude toward it? It is not our business, I take it, to follow our first instinct and strenuously to attempt to disprove the truth of the judgment. If it is impossible, as Burke found it to be, to draw up an indictment against a whole people, it is certainly quite as impossible for the accused people to answer the indictment. Nowhere is there such hopeless contradiction as between two such conflicting moral judgments. The logic of facts, the solemn issues of history, can alone adjudicate between them. On the great question as to whether our moral instincts or those of the German are the sounder, that austere Cosmic Chief Justice, "the Great Soul of the World," is the only competent judge. But if it is gratuitous to discuss the truth of this judgment, we may still hope to gather something of its significance. Altogether unfounded we cannot call it, if only we let our minds pass in review the main features of English social life, or if we turn the pages wherein those features are faithfully reflected or brought into bold relief by skillful caricature. It cannot be by mere accident that the works of Thackeray, Dickens, and George Eliot are so full of hypocrites. I do not refer merely to those characters who are living embodiments of this vice, as Mr. Pecksniff and Mr. Chadband. What is far more significant is the diffusion of this quality over a number of more commonplace characters, and most significant of all, perhaps, is the sympathetic treatment of hypocrisy as in the case of Mr. Bulstrode. In contemplating such a masterly creation, we leave far behind the vulgar view of the hypocrite as one who deliberately plays a part to secure his own ends. Such persons there may be, but they are not specially interesting to students of national

character, for the simple reason that a fruitful study of character must always be from the dynamic and not from the static point of view. It is only when we are confronted with a hypocrite like Mr. Bulstrode, whose self-deception is so far from being deliberate and whose hypocrisy presents itself as the blind struggle of a shipwrecked character to save the wreckage of its nobler impulses, that we realize not merely that we are all more or less hypocrites in this sense, but that such hypocrisy is the degenerate state of a high and aspiring nature—is the defect, perhaps, of our national virtue.

Let us return for a moment to Mr. Gladstone. At the time of his death, when party passions had subsided there was a practical unanimity as to the essential nobleness of his character. Many and grievous as his mistakes may have been, and great as may have been his occasional self-deception, few would question the fact that he was animated throughout his life by the loftiest motives. But we all know how far this unanimity of opinion was from existing some twenty years ago; we know how easily possible it was for honest and capable men with the strongest desire for the good of their country to regard Mr. Gladstone's motives with the gravest suspicions. I am not blaming these men. On the contrary, my point is that the peculiar cast of Mr. Gladstone's mind and the line of action it prompted him to take were such as to justify their suspicion and to render their low estimate of his motives plausible. Before we proceed to attempt a psychological analysis, let us take a historic instance of a similar misconception.

Few great Englishmen present so many points of contrast to Mr. Gladstone as Oliver Cromwell. I need not stop to point out in detail the differences between the hero of the Independents and the devoted son of the Anglican church, between the rebel of whom events made a conservative and the stern and unbending Tory who developed into a radical reformer. In spite of the undoubted contrast they were both typical Englishmen, and, in one fundamental respect at least, they had none the less in common for belonging to such different types. Both were men of action and both were essentially religious. Now it is easy enough in these post-Carlylean days, to recognize the

true greatness of Cromwell, but we show a great lack of historical imagination if we fail to realize how easy it must have been for the honest cavalier to regard old Noll as a consummate hypocrite. And indeed I question if the modern reader of the "Letters and Speeches" who does not start with a prepossession in Oliver's favor will not come to a similar conclusion.

We may well ask, therefore, what makes it possible that two diametrically opposite constructions should be put on the motives of such eminently typical Englishmen; and the answer, if we find one, ought to shed some light on the nature of the English national character and on the significance of the foreign criticism already mentioned.

Both our examples were men of action, and both were of essentially religious temper. That is the strength of the English character. Both so spoke and acted as to lay themselves open to serious misconstruction. That is the ambiguity of the English character. Both were probably the victims of occasional unconscious self-deception. That is the weakness of the English character, leading us gradually downward through Bulstrode to Pecksniff. The great achievement then of the English character lies in the combination of the religious temper and the practical temper. In Plato's beautiful myth the human soul is symbolized by a chariot drawn by two horses, one of which tends ever downward to the earth, while the other strains upward toward the soul's native eternity. To guide such an unequal pair with skill, to preserve the enthusiasm kindled by the contemplation of the ideal, to carry it amid the distractions of everyday life and to turn it into a force for the relief of man's estate, is indeed a difficult task. There is another story of Plato's meant to illustrate this very difficulty. If our social anarchy is to be repressed, says Plato, and our ideal of the true state realized, philosophers must become kings or kings philosophers. "Ah, but the philosopher," says the ready objector, "the man of ideas, is such a feckless loon! Once bring him down from his castle in the air to be cross-examined in the law courts or heckled on a political platform, and he straightway loses his head. How can such a man have a saving truth for society?" So Plato tells the story of the cave,

where men are bound down in darkness, hearing only the echoes of passing voices and seeing only the uncertain shadows of fleeting images. When these unhappy prisoners are unbound and led upward to the glory of the sunlight, they are dazzled and confused by the strange sights and sounds which crowd upon them, and seem at first less clear in their notions than they were in the subdued twilight of their cave. So, too, when they desire to redescend to share their new discoveries with their less fortunate fellows, they find they must grope their way blindly in the now unfamiliar darkness. They can no longer speak glibly in the language of the cave or deal deftly with its echoes and shadows, and so their new wisdom is set at naught by the benighted people whom they have come to help. Such is the parable of Plato, pregnant with truth for all time. He states the problem with such admirable clearness that we see readily why he fails to solve it. His philosopher-kings are men of mere intellect, and to the mere intellect the difficulty of constant passage between the cave and the daylight, between the ideal and the actual, is insuperable. What was impossible to the philosophic mind became possible five centuries later to the religious spirit, and we find Paul of Tarsus saying that he is "all things to all men, if by any means he can save some." The revolution introduced by Christianity was the opening of a way from the highest to the lowest states of consciousness; so that the apostle could bring his vision of the seventh heaven to bear, in his talk with the Phrygian slave or the Roman sentinel. But this triumph of reason was a defeat of logic. The Jacob's ladder which afforded this new intercourse of earth and heaven was no chain of syllogisms. Henceforward, he who would aspire to lead his fellows upward must trust to inspiration and walk by faith. Here then we have the discovery of a new method which is destined to be the main instrument in human progress, but which, at the same time, opens the way to manifold hypocrisies. We might call it a moral tight-rope performance if we could imagine that aerial exploit to be as beneficent as it is perilous; and the well-balanced moral sense needed to bring a man through in safety is rarer than the gifts of a Blondin.

Now, while an apostle may exercise the gift of prophecy, and, ignoring the logical demands of the carnal mind, compare spiritual things with spiritual; the ordinary man of action, and still more the statesman, must have principles and attempt to be consistent. This is a highly necessary concession to human weakness in general, and to party government in particular. Strict consistency, however, is incompatible with growth or progress. As every important action is without a precedent, we modify our principles in applying them, and make a new law while professing to obey the old. In the acts of our private lives, this presents little difficulty. A healthy mind will meet each case on its own merits, and as long as conscience is satisfied will care little about consistency. But in public life it is different. The statesman has not only to act; he must explain and justify his action. It is as if the tight-rope walker were obliged, in the very act of striking his delicate balance, to discourse with convincing eloquence on the science of equilibrium. We need not wonder if he shirks so difficult a task. Perhaps while concentrating his mind on the practical performance, he will mechanically recite a few imposing commonplaces. Or possibly, in the midst of a brilliant and searching disquisition, he may fall and break his political neck. But how if he take both his functions seriously, as the English statesman who is neither a cynic nor a doctrinaire is likely to do. Then his speech will become incoherent, either with the broken and frank incoherence of a Cromwell, or else, with gifts of another order, he may find in emotional and imaginative language the power to make incoherence itself eloquent and convincing. "He has one gift," said Macaulay of Gladstone, "most dangerous to a speculator—a vast command of a kind of language, grave and majestic, but of vague and uncertain import. . . . If it is admitted into a demonstration it is very much worse than absolute nonsense; just as that transparent haze, through which the sailor sees capes and mountains of false sizes and in false bearings, is more dangerous than utter darkness; . . . and in this way he deludes first himself and then his readers. The more strictly Mr. Gladstone argues from his premises, the more absurd are the conclusions he brings out."

True enough, but then the statesman's business is not to draw logical conclusions from unexceptional premises: but to impose a frame of mind upon others, to *infect* a multitude of followers with the convictions if not with the insight of their leader. Your philosopher who must see the end from the beginning is not cut out for work like this. And yet if progress is to be made, if practice is not to degenerate, the ideal and the actual must never lose touch with each other. "Trust in God," said Cromwell, "*and* keep your powder dry." We live in a time of more complex thought, and the poles of our consciousness are more distant from each other. It is harder to connect Mr. Gladstone's theology with his budgets than it is to conceive how the Lord General wrestled in prayer before he dismissed the Rump. Nevertheless, the art of living the great life lies in keeping up this connection; not by logic—that is impossible—but by faith—by the confidence acquired in long practice. So, too, by continuous practice is acquired the power to connect an ever-lengthening chain of subtle moral perceptions. And the peculiarity of the English character is that it is based on a much longer continuous practice than that of any other people. It has thus acquired the psychological dexterity by which the power of a distant ideal is brought to bear through hidden subtle and devious channels on the affairs of daily life. To the outsider—the unfriendly and unsympathetic critic—the obvious incongruity of our professed aims with our practice presents itself as sheer hypocrisy. Into hypocrisy indeed it may all too easily slide. For the conditions I have described, while they render possible a great elevation of character, bring with them the risk of a disastrous fall.

The great word with the Germans is "Foresight;" you rarely see a German go out without his overcoat. With foresight you may go safely but not far; and Germany is the land of moral mediocrity. The basis of English morality is Insight. With insight you may go far and do great things: but you must walk by faith. England therefore is the land of moral extremes. "For if the light which is within you be darkness, how great is that darkness."

LONDON.

GEORGE UNWIN.